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The Leaks at the White House

Like every modern president, Ronald Reagan complains about news leaks. Last January, for example, he grouched that he had "had it up to my keister" with published tidbits of White House gossip and untimely revelations about administration business. Unlike some of his predecessors, however, Reagan often sounds as if he believes that news stories attributed to unnamed White House officials are outright fabrications or come from sources no higher than the White House steno pool. But angry as he sometimes seems, says one well-placed and trusted aide, Reagan probably "knows a lot more than he tells" about who is leaking what to whom—and why.

In fact, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue often resembles nothing so much as a pressure cooker for calculated leaks, complete with well-established pipelines to reporters for influential news organizations like The Washington Post, The New York Times, the news magazines and the television networks. The vast majority of leaks from the White House are not only condoned by the president's senior staff, they are encouraged—to test public reaction, to send signals (often in code) to other players in the political process, to win favor with the press or simply, as one White House official says, "to put our spin on things."

Controlling that public-relations "spin" is a task that involves virtually all of Reagan's top-level aides, including White House chief of staff James A. Baker, deputy chief of staff Michael Deaver and presidential counselor Edwin Meese III. Valued sources because they are most likely to be in the decision-making "loop," all three are routinely available to reporters for background briefings—which means, under the longstanding rules of Washington journalism, that they cannot be quoted by name. Baker, known as a straight shooter and a shrewd judge of the political moment, prob-

ably enjoys the best media relations—while Meese is known as "No Problems Ed" because of his dogged insistence on taking a loyally rosy view of Reagan's prospects.

Other leading leakers include national-security adviser William Clark and David Gergen, assistant to the president for communications. Many reporters cultivate other ranking officials like presidential assistant Richard Darman, cabinet secretary Craig Fuller and Richard Williamson, assistant to the president for intergovernmental relations.

Using the Press: Clark, despite his low public profile, has a small stable of foreign-policy specialists he sees regularly. According to his colleagues, he was the anonymous official who earlier this month told The Washington Post that Reagan would take "all necessary measures" to keep El Salvador from going communist. Fuller—along with several other aides—helped ease Anne Burford out of her job as administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency by indicating to reporters that the White House was displeased with her performance; those leaks were designed both to persuade Burford that she should resign and to persuade the president that she had become such a political liability that he would have to accept her resignation. Virtually all of the Reagan aides, with the exception of Meese, confided to reporters that they were working to change the president's mind on his budget priorities. The aim was not to portray Reagan as a lightweight who was managed by his staff, but rather to use the press to make him see the need to make some compromises.

On the journalistic side—elbowing each other for access and exclusives—are reporters like Lou Cannon of The Washington Post, Steven R. Weisman of The New York Times and Bill Plante and Lesley Stahl of CBS News. Cannon, who regularly covered

Reagan when he was governor of California, has close ties to Meese, Deaver and Clark, which may give him the best of sources in the Reagan White House. Weisman chats frequently with Gergen—so frequently, Baker jokes, that Gergen's title should be "assistant to The New York Times for communications." Plante is close to Deaver, a relationship that dates to the 1980 campaign; Stahl and Darman are longtime personal friends. Williamson seems to confide in syndicated columnist Robert Novak. "Forget [Reagan's anti-leaks] policy," suggests one senior aide. "Just tell Gergen he can't talk to Weisman and the networks, tell Meese and Clark they can't talk to Cannon, tell Williamson he can't talk to Novak, tell Deaver he can't talk to Plante and tell Darman he can't talk to Stahl."

But forbidding these aides to speak with reporters wouldn't work, as everyone in the White House knows. The journalistic appetite for leaks is virtually insatiable—and not only for exclusive news, but also for anecdotes and bits of colorful detail that lend life to news stories and impress both editors and readers with the sense that they are getting an insider's view of what goes on in high places. Given the full-time attention of dozens of talented, competitive reporters—and the powerful communications weapon they wield—no group of public officials can resist leakage for long. Presidents crave exposure the way ordinary mortals need air—which means the presidential keister, in all probability, will be tingling again soon.

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